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Sleeping While Driving

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Editorial

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For teenagers, motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death (1). In 2010, seven teenagers 16–19 years of age died every day from motor vehicle injuries in the United States (1). Young people 15–24 years of age represent only 14% of the US population, but they account for 30% ($19 billion) of the total costs of motor vehicle injuries among males and 28% ($7 billion) of the total costs of motor vehicle injuries among females (1), so, in fact, is a public health concern of some magnitude.

Driving when tired is not healthy. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recently published a report on drowsy driving and risk behaviors from the 2011 to 2012 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey with 92,102 respondents from 10 states and Puerto Rico (2).

The respondents were asked, "During the past 30 days, have you ever nodded off or fallen asleep, even just for a brief moment, while driving?" Drowsy driving was defined as an affirmative response, whereas no drowsy driving included responses of "no" and also 81 responses of "don't know/not sure" (2). Those who responded that they did not drive or did not have a license (5575) were excluded from the analysis. Frequent insufficient sleep was defined as ≥14 days in response to "During the past 30 days, for about how many days have you felt you did not get enough rest or sleep"? Respondents were also asked, "On average, how many hours of sleep do you get in a 24-h period? Think about the time you actually spend sleeping or napping, not just the amount of sleep you think you should get". "Do you snore"?, and "During the past 30 days, for about how many days did you find yourself unintentionally falling asleep during the day (categorized as none or ≥1 day)"?

Among the 92,102 respondents, 4.0% reported falling asleep while driving during the preceding 30 days, and drowsy driving decreased with age (linear trend $p<0.001$) from 5.9% among adults 18–24 years of age to 1.8% among adults ≥65 years of age. Overall, the age-adjusted prevalence of drowsy driving was higher among men than women (5.0% compared to 3.0%, $p<0.001$). The prevalence of drowsy driving for men 18–34 years of age was 6.9%, compared to 3.5% for women in the same age group. Drowsy driving prevalence was higher among all other racial/ethnic groups compared with non-Hispanic Whites ($p<0.05$) and did not differ by educational level. Among the 10 states and Puerto Rico, drowsy driving prevalence ranged from 1.8% in Oregon to 7.4% in Puerto Rico. These prevalence estimates can be extrapolated to approximately 1.8 million drivers driving drowsy in the last 30 days in the 10 states and Puerto Rico (2).

Drowsy driving collerated with under 5 hours' sleep per 24 h, with snorers, among binge drinkers, and with drivers not usually wearing seatbelt, whereas smoking status was not relevant to this problem. The high-risk population for this problem seems to be among young males.

Motor vehicle crashes are higher among those 16–19 years of age than among any other age group, and risk factors have been found to be a male, teenagers driving with teenaged passengers, newly licensed teenagers, and driving on evenings and weekends (1).

To prevent drowsy driving, drivers should get enough sleep, seek treatment for sleep disorders, and avoid alcohol use before driving (2). Drivers should recognize the symptoms of drowsiness and respond appropriately when on the road (2).

Public health efforts should be geared toward the aforementioned risk factors.

References

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